



4th of July

An American Celebration

In the summer of 1776, delegates from the 13 British colonies in North America gathered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to discuss and debate a bold proposition—"that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states."



WHILE THE REBELLIOUS DELIBERATES, a committee of five men, led by Thomas Jefferson, drafted a document that would become known as the Declaration of Independence. In presenting the colonies' case for independence to the world, the declaration laid down the new nation's founding principles: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Those assembled in Philadelphia voted to approve the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, and that date has since been regarded as the official birthday of the United States of America.

Spontaneous celebrations of the anniversary began in the following year. In Philadelphia, there were singing fests, bonfires, and fireworks. Ships in the harbor fired 13-gun salutes, and people illuminated their houses with candles in the windows. By 1820 all major American cities staged elaborate observances, a tradition that continues to this day.

While many localities add their own customs to their 4th of July celebrations, festivities across the United States invariably include parades, band concerts, sporting events, picnics, and fireworks displays. And everywhere—from small towns to agricultural communities to big cities—Americans proudly display their country's flag as they celebrate their common heritage of freedom and democracy.

*Self-government...restores the
free right to the unbounded exercise
of reason and freedom of opinion
....Let the annual return of this day
forever refresh our recollections of
these rights, and an undiminished
devotion to them.*

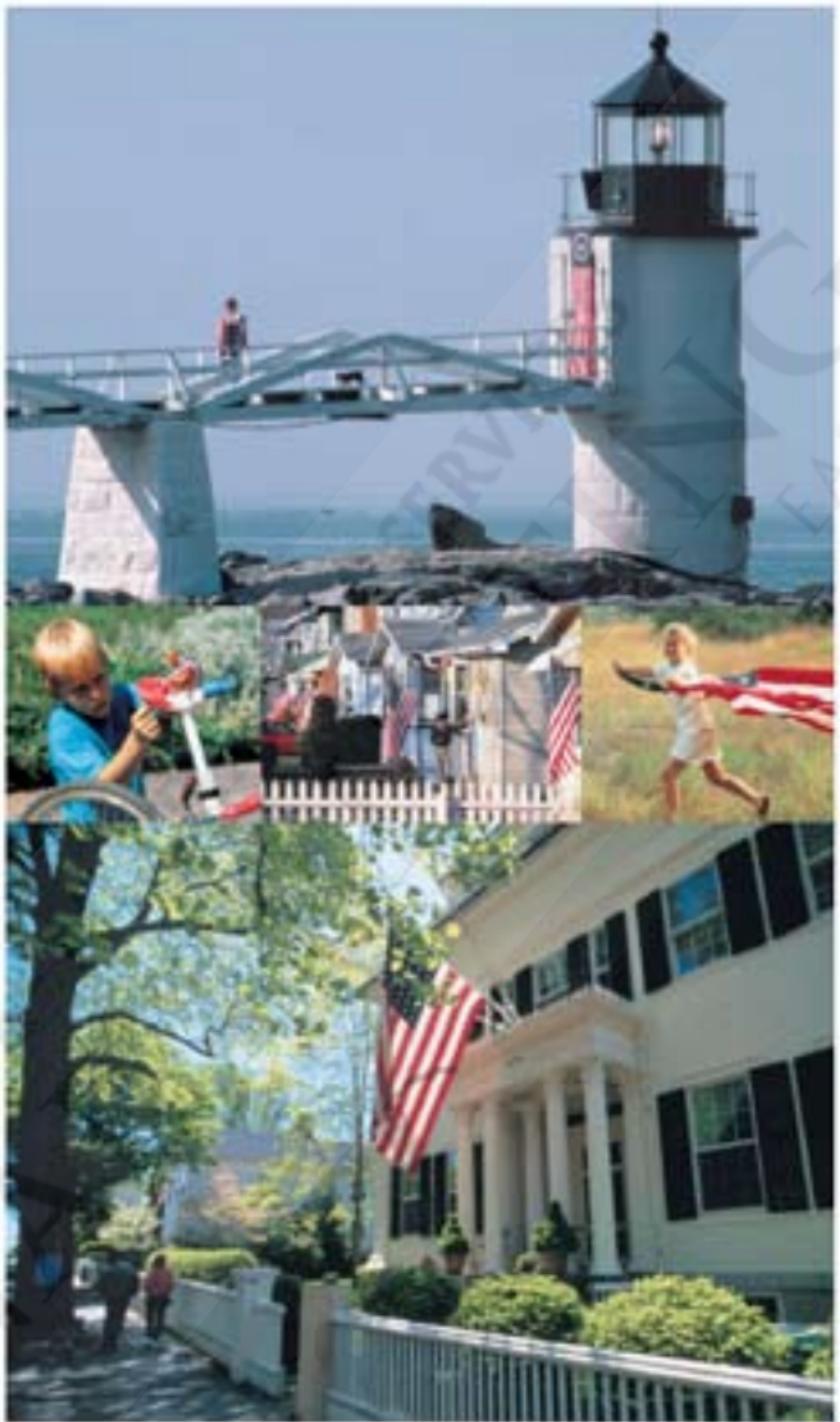
Thomas Jefferson Author of the Declaration of Independence and third president

of the United States, from a letter on the 1866 anniversary of Independence Day.

1826



When the 4th of July dawns, the American flag is unfurled from one end of the country to the other—an on porch railing or a row of modest homes in New Jersey, above the entrance to an elegant old residence in Connecticut, and running freely through a field in New York. On Independence Day, Americans also use the red, white, and blue of the flag to decorate their favorite things—a bicycle in California, a lighthouse in Maine. Often referred to as "the stars and stripes," the American flag contains 13 stripes that represent the original 13 states and 50 stars for each of today's states. As each state joined the Union, its name was added to the flag on the following 4th of July. The last additions were Alaska and Hawaii in 1959.



*Hats off!
Along the street there comes
A blare of bugles, a ruffle
of drums,
A flash of color beneath the sky:
Hats off!
The flag is passing by!*

Henry H. Bennett America's voice from her past "The Flag Goes By."

1 8 9 8



The flag passes along a southern California street, while communities everywhere gather to take part in their annual 4th of July parades. This event typically includes a bit of U.S. history, often with a Civil War reenactment. Wearing colonial costumes and playing musical instruments from the colonial era are popular on this day, especially in places like New York and Massachusetts, which were among the original 13 states. A stagecoach in Minnesota reminds midwesterners of their ancestors' trek across the frontier and an antique car in Colorado, carrying the parade's Grand Marshal, is familiar to all Americans. Military troops, here leading a parade in Alaska, are mainstays of the event. But a parade would be nothing without someone to enjoy it; often the whole town, including children in New Hampshire and older Americans in Oklahoma, turns out for the festivity.



The Fourth of July still reminds us of...the discovery of the American summer as another continent, a land of ice and ice cream and baseball and beach picnics and outdoor concerts, of freedom...itself.

John Updike, American writer from his essay "The Jewel of July"

I 9 9 I



Arriving at the height of summer in the United States, the 4th of July gives people a chance to take a day off from work and enjoy their favorite outdoor activities. Baseball, long considered the national pastime, draws a sell-out crowd in Texas and at ballparks around the country. Many communities sponsor events for children and adults, from a juvenile race in Kansas to a sack race in New Jersey and a marathon run in Omaha. And at some time on this national holiday, families and friends gather to share an all-American meal—like an outdoor picnic in Texas, featuring an array of cold salads and vegetables to accompany the tradition of grilled hot dogs and hamburgers, or something more regional, like a clamboil in Massachusetts, including lobsters, clams, and corn on the cob.



*I am apt to believe that it will be
celebrated by succeeding generations
as the great anniversary festival....It
ought to be solemnized with pomp and
parade, with shows, games, sports, guns,
bells, bonfires, and illuminations from
one end of this continent to the other
from this time forward forevermore.*

John Adams Member of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence and

second president of the United States, from a letter to his wife Abigail, July 3,

1776



John Adams was right. For more than 200 years, Americans have celebrated the 4th of July just as he envisioned, ringing the day with spectacular fireworks displays. In Philadelphia, fireworks light the sky above Independence Hall, while in Washington, D.C., colorful rockets burst over the U.S. Capitol and the monuments to Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Along the Hudson River in New York City, crowds gather for the last hours of the day. At the heart of all the festivities—from the early morning flag raisings to the parades, picnics, and pyrotechnics—is the true reason for Americans' rejoicing on Independence Day: "As long as we celebrate the Fourth," says historian James O'Rourke, "we remind ourselves that America is an independent nation that still believes...as a place devoted to democracy and to the proposition that all people are created equal."

